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House panel rebukes CIA on Nicaragua

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WASHINGTON — In a rare public report, the House Select Committee on Intelligence said yesterday that the U.S.-supported covert operation in Nicaragua has been a failure that has cost "innocent lives" and has tarnished the reputations of the United States and the CIA.

The detailed, 44-page report about the CIA's assistance to the rebels fighting the leftist Sandinista government also suggested strongly that the Reagan administration had violated a law precluding the use of federal funds to overthrow that government.

"The United States has allied itself with insurgents who carry the taint of the last Nicaraguan dictator, [Anastasio] Somoza," the report said. "[It] has allowed the spotlight of international opprobrium to shift from [Sandinista] attempts to subvert a neighboring government [El Salvador] to attempts to subvert that of Nicaragua."

The CIA has been hurt, the committee said, because it again has been subjected to critical public scrutiny. The covert action "has put CIA witnesses who do not make policy in the increasingly uncomfortable position of trying to sell the program to an increasingly skeptical Congress," it said.

The report by the committee, which, like the House, is controlled by Democrats, is the first formal congressional accounting of the covert action in Central America since it began 18 months ago.

The committee noted that some of its members, including chairman Edward P. Boland (D., Mass.), as early as last spring had sought to end the operation by withholding funds requested by the CIA. Instead, the committee had voted to restrict the operation to the interception of arms shipments for Salvadoran guerrillas.

The report accused the CIA and the Reagan administration of misleading the committee on U.S. objectives in Nicaragua, and it voiced suspicion that administration officials "delib-

erately" had leaked the story of the CIA campaign to the press. The report gave no reason for that suspicion.

"For the first time, the report said formally what has long been known: that the original goal of the covert action, as outlined by the administration and authorized by oversight subcommittees of both the House and Senate, was to interdict Cuban and Nicaraguan weapons shipments to Salvadoran guerrillas."

The House panel issued the report to explain the reasons for legislation it approved May 3 to end the covert operation and to create an \$80 million "overt" fund to intercept the arms shipments. That bill, embraced by a 9-5 partisan vote, will be debated tomorrow by the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

The Republican-controlled Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, approved legislation two weeks ago that would allow the CIA to continue the covert operation until Sept. 30. After that date, money for the program would be withheld pending a report to Congress by President Reagan defining his goals in Nicaragua.

The report said the House committee began to lose faith in administration briefings when it was told that the CIA had several other goals besides arms interdiction, including the democratization of Nicaragua and pressure on the Sandinistas to call elections and negotiate with the opposition.

The committee report also expressed "distress" at the number of insurgents supported by the program. Although no figures were cited, committee sources have said the CIA told them that the rebels' Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) has grown from 500 men in 1981 to about 7,000 now.

The report said that five days after the first CIA briefing in December 1981, Boland noted this concern about the insurgents' numbers "in a letter to the principal executive branch briefer," apparently CIA Director William J. Casey.

The central segment of the report said: "In its final review of the [covert] program, the [House intelligence] committee asked three ques-

tions: Is the program consistent with the law and with the direction of the Congress? Is the program a wise one? Is the program successful?"

"As to the first question, the law says that the program may not have the purpose to overthrow the government of Nicaragua. The committee has reached the point where it is unwilling to assure the House that the present program meets [this requirement].

"The activities and purposes of the anti-Sandinista insurgents ultimately shape the program. Their openly acknowledged goal of overthrowing the Sandinistas, the size of their forces and efforts to increase such forces, and finally their activities now and while they were on the Nicaraguan-Honduran border point not to arms interdiction but to military confrontation....

"These groups are not controlled by the United States. They constitute an independent force. The only element of control that could be exercised by the United States, cessation of aid, is something that the executive branch has no intention of doing.

"The second question — is this wise? The committee is forced to respond in the negative. Inflicting a bloody nose on nations achieves a purpose no different with nations than with individuals. It tends to instill a deep desire to return the favor. The Sandinistas are no different. Their policies have not softened.

"Finally, and most importantly, the program has not interdicted arms. In 18 months the committee has not seen any diminishment in arms flow to the Salvadoran guerrillas but rather repeated border clashes followed recently by heavy fighting well inside Nicaragua. In the process, innocent lives have been lost."

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